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Blue Ribbon: a Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair

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Commentaries on essays in the volume by Don F. Harbinger, Harold Woodman, Allan Bogue, Ross B. Talbot, and Lauren Soth help integrate the essays into a meaningful framework of analysis. This collection is an important source of information about the USDA, but scholars interested in a general history of the USDA should begin with the still standard work, *A Century of Service: The First 200 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*, by Gladys L. Baker, Wayne D. Rasmussen, Vivian Wiser, and Jane Porter.

Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair, by Karal Ann Marling. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990. ix, 328 pp. Illustrations, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY CHRIS RASMUSSEN, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

American agricultural fairs, in Karal Ann Marling's words, are home to "a curious symbiosis," in which educational exhibits and amusement features coexist side-by-side (187). Appropriately, *Blue Ribbon*, her history of the Minnesota State Fair from its inception in 1854 to the 1980s, is an engaging book that both instructs and entertains the reader. Marling, one of America's most accomplished historians of popular culture, has written with distinction on topics as diverse as regionalist mural painting, roadside architecture, and the virtual beatification of George Washington in American culture. Her characteristic insight and irreverent wit are both on display once again here.

Only a historian with a heartfelt respect for popular culture could declare, as Marling does in her preface, that the Minnesota State Fair, and by implication all midwestern state fairs, "is our central cultural institution—the place where all the varied strands of immigration, agriculture, commerce, politics, aesthetic preference, and moral standards meet and mingle" (vii). The state fair is thus a microcosmic Minnesota, or at least the nearest thing to it that we are likely to find. It is surprising that these important and fascinating institutions have been largely neglected by historians, and we may thank Marling for beginning to redress this oversight.

Marling's preface also includes two caveats. First, she warns the reader that she has not attempted to write a comprehensive history of the agriculturists whose devotion to economic improvement led to the founding and guided the subsequent development of the Minnesota State Fair. Second, and more important, this is a book not "much given to isms" (vii), but one that allows the sources to speak for themselves, without subjecting their testimony to historical and methodological cross-examination. It is also unencumbered by footnotes and most

other scholarly apparatus that may annoy the general reader, but without which the professional historian usually feels as though he or she is riding no-hands. What Marling has attempted to do is to write "a sort of collective history of 'fairness,'" her "guiding principle" being "the fact that fairs are meant to be looked at—that they are, at bottom, visual experiences" (vii–viii).

"The American agricultural fair," Marling observes, "is an institution of mixed bloodlines—part Roman carnival, part medieval market fair, and part English cattle show" (77). It is not easy to squeeze such a wide range of activities, along with nearly 140 years of history, between the covers of even a big book such as this one, but she succeeds nicely. Her account of the Minnesota State Fair is divided into twenty self-contained, topical chapters, which treat virtually all of the fair's components, from its livestock judging and machinery exhibits to its midway rides, architecture, even its "cuisine-on-a-stick." In addition, the book also includes many diversions, in the form of short essays, newspaper excerpts, and curiosities from the fair's past, which occupy its margins or even whole pages. It could be that Marling is throwing down a challenge to the validity of historical narrative (although she makes no such claim), but what is certain is that these sidebars and separate pieces transform reading this book into an experience of browsing and constant discovery reminiscent of attending an actual state fair. On the other hand, it may be objected that splintering the subject into topical chapters and focusing on the fair as an event cause Marling to slight the overarching story of the fair's growth and evolution as an institution.

True to her insistence that the fair is primarily a visual experience, Marling's book is lavishly illustrated with black-and-white photographs (many of which were taken at the 1987 fair specifically for this book), fair posters, and other images. Many of these illustrations are incorporated into the narrative, but most are confined to separate pages between chapters. While this format doubtless reduced the headache of laying out so many photographs, it tends to divorce them from the text they ought to support. Still, Marling's keen eye for quirky, candid photographs allows her to present the fair in all its ordinariness, a welcome antidote to the exaggerated rhetoric of its promoters. Her proclivity for juxtaposing photos from different eras is sometimes ahistorical, but often arresting.

Residents of other states may bristle at Marling's unabashed (but good-natured) assertion that the Minnesota State Fair stands above its counterparts as "the greatest of them all" (297), but anyone who has ever attended a state or county fair (a description that includes nearly

every midwesterner) will recognize much that is familiar in this delightful book.

The Great Silent Majority: Missouri's Resistance to World War I, by Christopher C. Gibbs. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988. x, 174 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PETER L. PETERSEN, WEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

In this provocative little book, Christopher C. Gibbs, a historian and free-lance writer, claims that a majority of Missourians opposed American participation in World War I from its beginnings all the way to the Armistice on November 11, 1918. They manifested this opposition by not cooperating with war bond drives, military conscription, and campaigns to augment food supplies by increasing production and reducing consumption. To use a pejorative word from that period, Gibbs says "slacking" was the common response of most Missourians to the war effort.

Why did Missouri's citizens react this way? Gibbs finds explanation for their behavior in the attitudes of "localism, faith in democracy, and anticorporate sentiment," which "were deeply rooted in Missouri and underlay the responses to the war of many, perhaps a majority of the people in the state" (6). These factors, then, more than the traditional linkage by historians of opposition to ethnicity and radical political beliefs, define the antipathy of many Missourians to the war. Most residents of the state, Gibbs asserts, thought the president and Congress were more willing to listen to the "special interests" who stood to benefit from the conflict than to the wishes of "the people" who opposed it.

During the prewar period, the forces of modernization, led by Frederick B. Mumford, dean of Missouri's College of Agriculture, had struggled with only limited success to get farmers to "abandon primitive methods and the constraints of a local market economy" (20). But with war came new opportunities for the modernizers. Mumford, for example, headed Missouri's Council of Defense and served as the state's federal food administrator. Now able to cloak their campaign in the red, white, and blue of patriotism, they waged a relentless assault on the defenders of traditionalism. Even though the traditionalists were finally muzzled, they continued to resist wartime mobilization. Because this resistance, with the exceptions of the bitter Lead Belt strike of 1917 and a general strike in Kansas City the following year, was increasingly passive, Gibbs believes that historians have mistakenly equated silence with majority support for the war.

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